

"THE STORY OF OUR LIVES FROM YEAR TO YEAR"

ALL THE YEAR ROUND

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SEBASTIAN STROME.

BY JULIAN HAWTHORNE.

CHAPTER VIII. DIVERSION.

IT has been already mentioned, upon hearsay evidence, that Sebastian Strome was in possession of an income of nearly four hundred pounds, derived from a sum of eight thousand invested in the Four per Cents. As a matter of fact, he did own some money, and it was invested in the manner described; but the total amount of it had never much exceeded the half of what it was generally believed to be. The bequest had been made about five years before the present date, and for over four years Sebastian had lived very comfortably upon his modest income. After leaving the university he had travelled on the Continent, and had seen and enjoyed there quite as much as if his worldly resources had been twenty times greater. His was a cool, trenchant, self-contained character, not personally given to dissolute pleasures, but in no way squeamish about observing and associating with those who were, as well as with other people of quite different principles and practice. He carried very good letters of introduction, and could appear in the best society when he chose; but there was a Bohemian vein in the man which not seldom induced him to absent himself from aristocratic parlours, and appear in places where ladies, at least, were conspicuous by their absence. For that matter, indeed, Sebastian had never shown himself a very ardent admirer of the sex: if he had ever had any boyish love-affair, no one had ever heard of it: and on coming to years of discretion, though always knowing how to make himself agreeable to

women, he had never found it necessary to provide means for fascination by mortgages drawn on his heart. Besides, no sane parents would have countenanced so impetuous a son-in-law, although a son of Arthur Strome, and the nephew of personages still more highly placed in the world's esteem. Though welcome everywhere, therefore, he was still left free to follow his own devices, with no disinterested lady-mothers to warn him against the evils of an irregular mode of life, and artlessly to wean him therefrom by the pure-minded influence of their daughters. Nobody was ever more master of his movements than Sebastian Strome.

All this time he had not decided what profession he would follow, or, indeed, whether he would profess anything in particular. But happening to go to Rome one winter he became acquainted with certain dignitaries of the Church there, and found their conversation so agreeable, and sought their society so diligently, that several persons were ready to swear that he would be a member of the Society of Jesus before the spring. Certain it is that this experience gave a new turn to his thoughts; he saw religion from a hitherto unconsidered point of view, and would appear to have discovered in it so much that was in harmony with his taste, that at last he wrote home to his father and mother an intimation that he proposed to follow the former's example in entering the Established Church. Nothing was said in this letter about Romanism; very likely there was nothing to say. As for Mr. and Mrs. Strome, they rejoiced in the unforced accomplishment of the dearest wish of their hearts. Mr. Strome had never attempted to constrain his son's

inclination in respect to the choice of a calling; and though he had hoped and prayed with his whole soul that Sebastian might become a clergyman, he had too much regard for the latter's liberty of opinion, as well as too high a reverence for the sacred profession itself, even to have made its adoption by him a question of filial obligation. Sebastian having taken the initiative, however, the father opened his heart, and wrote a letter to the young man full of such eloquent joy, thanksgiving, and high anticipation, as made him turn pale and clench his teeth in the reading thereof, and often afterwards—in his darker, not in his brighter hours—it recurred with vividness to his memory. For Sebastian Strome stood in almost superstitious awe of his father. He heeded no other man in the world; but the minister himself was far from suspecting how profoundly he heeded him. Had the aims and natures of the two men been even remotely in accord (as Mr. Strome believed they were) this strange veneration would have brought about their constant and intimate companionship; as it was, Sebastian was impelled to keep as much as possible out of his father's way. "I could never breathe evenly in his atmosphere," he once admitted; "and it used up all the strength I had when he looked at me, just to keep it in mind that I was a man."

It was not long after the receipt of this letter that Sebastian returned to Cedarhurst, and prepared to begin his course of reading for the ministry. For some months, however (this was nearly two years previous to his betrothal to Mary Dene), he remained at the Vicarage, apparently in rather an unsettled frame of mind. The period between deciding upon a certain career, and actually entering upon it, is often characterised by restlessness and capricious humour. Sebastian fell into the habit of taking long walks, starting off in the evening and often not getting home till near midnight. His moods were fitful; sometimes he was uncommunicative and averse from conversation; at other times he would appear abnormally high-spirited and loquacious. But whenever the vicar tried to draw him out on the subject of his chosen profession, the young man became preoccupied and monosyllabic: evidently he was, for the present, at least, averse from religious and theological conversation. Once, apropos of some remark made by his father about the apostolic

succession, he said: "It is a great risk!" but he did not explain his meaning. Again, he observed one day to his mother after a long fit of silence: "I'm glad I was not St. Paul!" Nothing could be inferred from such declarations, except that the mind of him who made them might be less composed than his countenance. At another time he said: "No moralist can be religious!" But although these dark sayings occasioned his parents some solicitude, they never inspired them with a moment's misgiving. Their confidence in Sebastian's essential goodness and rectitude was without limits; their only uncertainty was in what way these qualities were likely to find their best development.

As the time for his removal to London drew near he made occasional visits to the metropolis, ostensibly for the purpose of selecting a convenient lodging; and also, no doubt, to renew his relations with such of his university and other friends as were living in town. The change seemed to brighten him up; he became more even-tempered, though not more disposed than before to encourage serious discussion. In fact, his tone in referring to the sacred matters which must be supposed to have been mainly occupying his thoughts, had in it an element of cheerful assurance, almost approaching to levity, which might have appeared irreverent coming from anyone else than himself. But Mr. and Mrs. Strome saw in it only that noble self-distrust in the face of divine mysteries which seeks to veil itself under an affectation of confidence. It was the sign of an insight too profound and delicate to venture on outspokenness. By-and-by, after the beatific vision had grown more familiar to his eyes, he would be able to command his tongue to fuller utterance of it.

Meanwhile, the lodgings were fixed upon, the qualified adieux were said, and the future Archbishop of Canterbury entered definitely upon his studies. There is no reason to doubt that all the technical work which the circumstances demanded was by him fully and punctually performed; for Sebastian was never deficient in mental application, and never found any difficulty in mastering whatever intellectual task might be set before him. His brain was scarcely subject to weariness or bewilderment; in fact, its activity was only too great, and, like the demon in the story, it was always returning to demand fresh employment, until it is no wonder if

its owner were occasionally in straits to devise occupations for it. The pressure of some such embarrassment, perhaps, was what led him to cast in his lot with the Mulberries—an association which, whatever its other merits, was not exactly calculated to afford a divinity student the most edifying methods of relaxation. In the case of such a man as Sebastian, however, mere conventional restrictions do not apply. He was not a hermit of the dark ages, to sit for days or weeks in motionless and solitary contemplation; a man's mind must be very vacant or very innocent to enable him to do that. Sebastian found it more agreeable to withdraw his thoughts from inward concerns, and give them a frequent outing; and thus it was that he became a pillar of the mysterious Mulberry Club, of which so few people knew anything beyond the name; and, as we have already seen, from the club-room to the Star Chamber was only a matter of an additional flight of stairs.

Gambling was not altogether a novelty to Sebastian Strome. He had practised it now and then while on the Continent, and always with such good success that it is surprising he did not indulge in it more. But his condition then had been, in certain ways, more independent than was the case now. For various reasons it would be convenient to him to have rather more money at present than formerly. He had incurred obligations—not pecuniary obligations exactly, but what amounted to pretty nearly the same thing—which rendered an increased expenditure almost unavoidable. Of course the renting and furnishing of his rooms had cost him something—too much to leave a very available margin. Gambling, besides being a diversion in itself, seemed to promise him exceptional advantages. In all games requiring skill, memory, and coolness, Strome was hard to beat; and it was chiefly such games that he meant to play. A few pounds a week in excess of his regular income would be enough for his needs, and he thought he could reasonably depend on making as much as that. As for heavy play, he had no intention of going in for it; and games of mere chance he would shun altogether. Upon the whole, therefore, the outlook was a good one.

But Strome had left out one factor in his calculation; and that was the contingency of great and persistent good fortune. He won so continually and so largely that it became rather awkward;

and in self-defence, as it were, he was constrained to give others an opening by suspending his rule as to games of chance. But all was of no avail: he was as obstinately successful at lansquenet as he had been at whist. What was to be done with all this money? After setting aside a hundred pounds, destined for a particular purpose, there was still a great deal remaining: this he neither desired to spend nor put into the bank; there was nothing for it but to go on playing. Since his object now was to lose, of course it made no difference to him how high the play was. But he could not lose. At length he began seriously to entertain the idea of giving his winnings to the club.

Matters did not come quite to this point, however. One evening he lost heavily. The next day he only held his own; the time following he won a little; then he lost for four days running; and the last day not only disposed of his winnings, but put him eighty or ninety pounds to the bad. In order to make up this deficiency, he played again. It is not necessary to follow the ups and downs any farther; henceforth Strome was a gambler like other gamblers. For a time he kept careful record of debit and credit; but ultimately this was discontinued, and often he could not have told within a hundred or two what amount of money he possessed. He knew that he was spending rather more than formerly; but he thought he could afford it. The general impression in the club was that he was still, upon the whole, a winner; and he allowed himself to share this impression without taking much trouble to verify it. So things went on until, on a certain September morning, he awoke to the consciousness that he had barely fifteen hundred pounds left in the world. The ensuing day he went down to Cedarhurst for a week's visit, and to think over his situation. It was during this week that he engaged himself to Mary Dene.

After this he was able to draw a long breath, and snap his fingers at fortune. At first, however, he thought he would leave off gambling; but a week's abstinence was enough to convince him that the time for such a piece of self-denial was past, or had not yet arrived. Besides, his mind was now more than ever in need of the distraction which nothing affords so well as gambling. Under different circumstances, perhaps, his engagement might have proved distraction enough; but its moral effect upon Sebastian was, from some

cause or other, by no means that of a sedative. And there were other considerations which made it seem desirable that he should try his luck once more. Even with his original four or five thousand pounds intact, he would go empty-handed enough to the heiress of Dene Hall; but to appear before her with but a third of that small sum would not only be humiliating in itself, but might lead to revelations which were better kept in the background. By recovering what he had lost, he would, therefore, be a gainer in every sense; whereas, should he lose what remained to him, he would be scarcely worse off than he was at present. The argument was quite as cogent as it had need to be; so Sebastian shuffled the cards and set to work with fresh vigour.

The story of the three months that followed would be wearisome to recapitulate here. There were no great strokes of either good or bad luck; but the general tendency was downward. On Monday night of the week in which our history begins Sebastian was actually left with a capital of rather less than one hundred pounds all told. But on Tuesday night, as has been already intimated, he rose a winner of five hundred, chiefly from Culver. And this brings us to the Wednesday night's work now going on. Previously to coming to the club on this evening, Sebastian had called on various tradesmen, and paid the bulk of the bills which had been for some time overdue. He had over three hundred pounds in his pocket when he sat down to play.

"Let the parson shuffle," said Ephraim Arch, handing a pack of cards to Strome.

"Well, what is it to be?" he said, taking them. "Here are six of us."

"I don't care to play—I'm sleepy," put in Smillet, smiling and yawning at the same time.

"That won't do; I once heard you snore; you must be kept awake at any cost," rejoined Arch. "Gentlemen, in view of the presence among us of Mr. Fawley, I propose that we try faro; or, as the ancients yelegt it, Pharaoh; and that I be banker."

"Why on my account?" enquired Fawley, wrinkling his forehead.

"History tells us that the Egyptian led the Israelite captive, and I fear that at any other game the Israelite might capture us. He owes me five pounds."

"Which he hereby returns with thanks," said Fawley, taking a note from his pocket and handing it to Arch very good-naturedly.

"Accept my acknowledgments; I withdraw my motion, and anybody may propose what he pleases. What say you, Jasper Grannit, Esquire?"

Grannit, who had just placed his snuff-box on the table beside him, merely shrugged his shoulders politely, and leant back dreamily in his chair.

"Why not piquet?" said Strome.

"Oh, I daresay!" cried Culver with an injured air. "Nobody here knows the game except you. Let's play lansquenet."

"I used to fancy that I knew something of piquet," remarked Fawley modestly.

Strome looked at him, and their glances met for an instant. Strome said, "Does anybody else speak for piquet?" But no one else spoke, until Smillet piped out:

"Come, I say, why not call it lansquenet, and have done with it? I'm too sleepy to play any other game, and anybody that wants piquet can play it afterwards."

"Lansquenet, lansquenet!" echoed Culver; and in the end this was the game decided on, and Strome had the first deal. He won his first stake, and passed the deal to Arch, who sat next him. Arch deposited his newly-acquired five-pound note, and being successful in his first deal, went on. Culver, who was his left-hand neighbour, covered the stake on the ensuing occasion, Arch winning again, and then passed the pack, observing that this was almost as good as Pharaoh. Culver, who, as far as deportment went, could hardly be deemed the ideal of a gambler, gnawed his fingers, shuffled his feet, and sputtered inarticulately; but ended, as usual, by thrusting his hands impulsively into his pockets for more money. Thus the game went on, steadily and uneventfully, for nearly two hours, everybody winning a little in turn except Culver; and when two o'clock struck, Smillet, who had been kept from sleep only by main force, had accumulated a small fortune of a hundred and ten pounds—a sum exceeding all the rest of the money then on the table. At this point, however, he flatly refused to play any longer; and pushing his winnings over to Strome, with directions to "lose it," he got up from the table, groped his way to a sofa, and lay down. The others closed up, and the play continued.

When it came to Strome's deal, he began by staking Smillet's money, and in four successive deals he doubled it, and put the joint sum in his pocket, apart from his proper possessions. In the next deal Grannit lost a small amount, and so it

went slowly round again. At the end of two hours more Strome headed the list with two hundred pounds, nearly half of which had come out of the pocket of the unlucky Culver. Arch, who was reduced to his original five pounds, prudently declared that he had had enough of it, and bidding the company good-night, he retired. Thus only four of the original six were left.

The room was now very quiet; there were no sounds except the vigorous snoring of Smillet from the sofa, the occasional brief murmurs of the players, the flip and shuffle of the cards, the chink of sovereigns, and the rustle of bank-notes. Culver was evidently the most exhausted of the four, in body as well as in purse; he had lit a long black cigar, but seemed to find little consolation in it. Grannit once in a while courteously veiled a yawn behind his white hand, and apparently felt less interest in the game than any of the others, which was not surprising, seeing that he had neither won nor lost very heavily. Strome and Fawley, however, were comparatively fresh; and as time went on, it looked as if the main contest would be between them.

All of a sudden, however, a duel began in which Grannit and Culver were the antagonists. The cards being with the former, Culver staked against him, and went on staking and losing no less than five times in succession. Culver risked a sixth stake and lost again; and Grannit, instead of giving him another chance, serenely drew in his winnings and surrendered the pack. This blow finished Culver, who had certainly contrived to draw upon himself three-fourths of the losses of the night. It was now half-past five o'clock.

Only three players renders lansquenet a lively game, and it so happened that Grannit, Strome, and Fawley seemed one and all to have been waiting for this opportunity of trying one another's strength. Grannit, for the first time during the night, appeared thoroughly awake; he was as bright and vivacious as his principles ever permitted him to be. He was, moreover, the most practised gambler of the three. How large his monetary resources might be it was impossible to guess; he was never at a loss for a stake, and whether he won or failed to win, he was equally suave and undemonstrative. Strome was graver and more earnest than he, but not less impenetrable. As for Fawley, although, as afterwards transpired, he had more money

about him than either of the others, he betrayed the greater anxiety and excitement. His small glistening eyes followed the turn of the cards with an intensity of inspection that seemed striving to palpably influence them. An onlooker, had there been one, might have remarked that Fawley and Strome never cared to contend much against Grannit, but reserved all their energies for each other. In fact, between these two it was battle à outrance, and defeat, on whichever side it should fall, would signify something more than pecuniary disaster. The stakes had by this time become perilously heavy. The fire had gone out long since, but none of the players were sensible of cold. None of them knew that Smillet was still snoring upon the sofa. They were aware of nothing save the gaudily-painted cards, the green table, and the money. They had forgotten everything else: by-and-by they almost forgot one another.

Smillet reluctantly awoke, with a sense of being shaken. He unclosed his eyes, and was obscurely aware that someone—his valet, probably—was standing over him and speaking to him with a voice that sounded curiously like Strome's. He felt cold, and not over comfortable. Was he in bed at all? Why, this was Strome himself! How did he get there? There was a ghastly light of early morning in the room—not his room—what room, then?

"Oh, I say, what's the matter?"

"Get up! It's after eight o'clock. Come down and get some breakfast. There's a fire downstairs. Wake up!"

"Downstairs? Where are we? Club? How—By Jove!"

"Wake up, Thomas—up with you! We have smitten the Israeli'e hip and thigh! Breakfast! Coffee, chops, champagne! Victory! Wake up!"

"I say, Strome, how you do go on! Ah-h-h—oh, let me have my yawn out! How pale you look! Where are the other fellows?"

"At breakfast—what's left of them."

"You haven't been playing all night? Who won?"

"Sit up, and I'll show you. Look here—and here. Three thousand—four thousand—four thousand five hundred. I won!"

"I should think so! Who lost it?"

"Mr. Selim Fawley, the friend of my youth, is the loser," replied Strome, returning the notes to his pocket with a curious smile. "The wonder is, how he

happened to have so much about him. Grannit left off within twenty pounds of where he started, though he was ahead of both of us at one time. It was between the Jew and me. Thomas, this is the happiest day of my life. He was delivered into my hands. I wouldn't have won it from any other man living. I'd have staked my salvation to win it from the friend of my youth, and probably that's the reason I did win it. One may take liberties with one's friends, you know."

"Strome, how you do go on! I never saw you so worked up before. You're as white as milk!"

"I'm hungry, Thomas—famished! Come down. Chops and coffee. I wish you'd been awake to see his visage when he put down the last stake, and I swept it away. Ha, ha! I could have fallen on his neck and embraced him!"

"I believe I smell those chops! By Jove! that makes me feel hungry too," said Smillet, turning up his broad nostrils and sniffing. "This leg's asleep still; give me your arm. My idea is, you should give up gambling and that sort of thing, or else cut the Church, as I did. Fancy sitting up all night too! Come along!"

They went downstairs arm-in-arm; and Smillet, had he not been preoccupied by the aroma of the chops, might have felt Strome's arm tremble under his, either from cold, fatigue, or excitement. It was true that this stoic had lost the better part of his stoicism for the time being. He was instinct with a sense of personal triumph and invincibility that seemed to lift him above human limitations. What should prevail against him? He lifted his head, and looked about him like a god; but he could not keep his hands and voice from vibrating a little, and scarcely commanded his speech to sober expressions.

In the room below the indefatigable Ashe had set out an enticing breakfast-table in a snug corner, with snow-white cloth, glistening covers, and smoking coffee-pot. The two seated themselves, and Smillet set to work upon the viands without delay. Strome, notwithstanding what he had said about his appetite, only swallowed a cup or two of black coffee, and crunched a few slips of dry toast. His triumph fed him. He kept glancing over towards the opposite end of the room, where Fawley and Grannit were busy at another table, and conversing in an undertone. Presently the latter turned, and called across:

"Good morning, Mr. Smillet! You lost a great deal by retiring so early."

"Not so much as if I'd kept awake!" returned Smillet; and laughed with ingenuous delight at the wit of the repartee. "I don't see how you fellows can stand keeping it up all night that way. I say, Fawley," he continued, fixing his eyeglass, "I'm awfully sorry for you—everybody must be!"

"The fortune of war," returned Fawley, raising and letting fall his hands, and smiling by a lifting of the upper lip. He got up, immediately after speaking, and sauntered across to the table at which Strome and Smillet were seated. He was evidently on his mettle—trying to appear as if the loss of more than four thousand pounds were not a matter to overthrow one's equanimity. The annals of the Mulberry Club scarcely contained the tradition of so large a sum being dissipated in a single night's play; a few hundreds was, as a rule, the outside limit. But the contest between Strome and Fawley had been no ordinary encounter. They had both meant mischief from the beginning, and now the mischief, such as it was, had been done and suffered pretty effectually.

Fawley, though looking somewhat haggard, was yet not so exhausted as might have been expected; his constitution was naturally sound, and he had just been aiding its operation by a pint of dry champagne. He paused in front of the table, rolling a cigarette, and moistening his lips with his tongue.

"I wonder you never tried the bank at Homburg, Strome," he said; "you'd be sure to break it. You have such superb luck in games of chance."

"Chance is chance. I generally play lansquenet to lose the surplus I win at whist and piquet," answered Strome, fixing his black eye on the other and smiling.

"Ah, there's nothing like piquet to win money—except lansquenet," added Fawley, laughing with comic ruefulness. "A man who really understands piquet can make about what he pleases."

"So you imagine you understand piquet, do you?" Strome said sneeringly.

"So well that I'm rather shy of playing it as a general thing. However, I don't mean to be boastful."

"It's a pity we couldn't have tried a hand or two last night; I should have been glad of a lesson from a master of the art, and it might have lightened me of

some part of this embarrassment of riches. Another time let us hope——"

"By Jove!" exclaimed Fawley suddenly. He had been feeling in all his pockets ostensibly for a match; but now he produced a roll of crisp white paper, which he unfolded. "By Jove! Fancy that! Here's a couple of hundred that I'd forgotten all about. A brand saved from the burning!"

"What's the matter now? Haven't you had enough of it yet, Mr. Fawley?" enquired Jasper Grannit, approaching leisurely with his hands in his pockets.

"Oh, see here!" piped Smillet, looking up from the stirring of his third cup of coffee with indignant nostrils; "no more talk about card-playing, gentlemen, if you please. I won't countenance it—upon my word I won't!"

"Calm yourself, Thomas," said Strome, leaning back in his chair and smiling.

"Mr. Fawley hasn't asked for his revenge yet. Perhaps his skill at piquet needs a night's sleep to put it in repair."

"You would be the bolder man of the two, Mr. Strome, if you'll allow me to say so," observed Grannit in his low voice.

"Luck would cease to deserve its name if it continued to smile on you after your last night's exploits. I wouldn't tempt it in your place."

"There's a difference between luck at piquet and luck at lansquenet—as Fawley seems to be aware," was Strome's rejoinder.

"I'll play you for the rest, if you like!" Fawley said abruptly, with the air of being egged on to make the challenge. "But, I tell you, I'm a better hand at the game than you seem to think. It's just as you like."

"Come home and go to bed, Strome!" interposed Smillet, wiping his mouth and starting up from the table. "You don't know what you're about!"

Strome also arose, and a little colour came into his pallid face as he said: "If a couple of hours will be of any use to you, Fawley, I am at your mercy for so long."

"Just as you like!" Fawley said again, tossing away his unlighted cigarette.

"Good-bye, then; I shall follow Mr. Smillet's suggestion, and take a nap," remarked Grannit, sauntering leisurely off again. "I can't say good luck to you—it would sound invidious. But may the issue be satisfactory. Ashe, bring me my coat."

"Well," declared Smillet in his most emphatic treble, "if you two fellows are resolved on making fools of yourselves, I

shall just stay here till you've done. And it would serve you right if you were both to lose all you've got—it would, upon my word!" And with loud sniffs of disapproval, the little man stalked over to the fire-place, and stood there indignantly warming his coat-tails, with his head in the air. Strome looked at him for a moment, as if inclined to say something; then apparently thinking better of it, he turned off with a half smile and a sideways movement of the head, and disappeared through the doorway leading upstairs to the Star Chamber. Fawley had gone on before; and then Smillet was left to himself. "It's too bad!" he murmured, addressing the portrait of Betterton on the opposite wall. "It's disgraceful!"

"Are you going?" enquired Grannit, looking in at the door, muffled up in his overcoat.

"I shall wait for Strome."

"You seem to be—that is, he seems to be a protégé of yours?"

"It's too bad—I declare it is!" reiterated Smillet positively.

"It strikes me the other way. Mr. Strome is embarrassed at having won so much, and wishes to be relieved of it. He couldn't have chosen a better method: Fawley is the best hand at piquet I ever saw."

"Then you've seen Fawley before?"

"Hum! I met him on the Continent."

"Well, if he can beat Strome, I'm going to wait and hear about it!" rejoined Smillet, fetching up his eyeglass with emphasis; and Grannit, after pausing a moment, smiled a little, nodded his head, and withdrew.

For an hour, at least, Smillet had the club-room quite to himself: he spent most of the time in moving about restlessly, inspecting the prints on the wall with abstracted gaze, and ever and anon breaking out into brief half-articulate monologues. Towards ten o'clock one or two members dropped in; others followed. Smillet kept himself aloof, affecting to be absorbed in a newspaper. At half-past eleven, however, there was a step in the room that he knew; he put down his paper and came forward. Strome met him with a bright, alert look, and slipping an arm under his, drew him on to the anteroom, where he began to put on his coat and muffler. "I want you to come home with me," he said.

"Where's Fawley?" Smillet demanded, intently eyeing his friend.

"Get on your things, Thomas—upstairs, I suppose!"

"Strome, how much money have you got?"

Strome laughed, and turned away. "I hardly know," he said. "When we get to my rooms we'll count it up. Come along!" And they descended the stairs together.

FROM A PENNY CHAIR.

THE morning and afternoon entertainments at the Theatre Royal, Hyde Park, during the run of the season, are the best and cheapest in London. They consist for the most part of genteel comedy, supported by an unlimited company of elegant leading ladies, elaborately got-up walking-gentlemen, and a few utility people. Provincial troupes occasionally furnish broad farce. Feats of equitation, both serious and burlesque, constantly come in for a share of admiration and laughter, and many a life's tragedy looms through the wan eyes of pale women otherwise favoured of fortune.

The price is but a penny to sit in the stalls and see the show go by. A penny is but a trifling sum for a day's rent of a nicely painted green arm-chair, and the privilege of staring at a comparatively unlimited supply of the nobility and gentry. The cheapest book on etiquette costs sixpence; but I venture to affirm that adults, who during their earlier years have been deprived of the society of duchesses, may obtain a better lesson in the niceties of out-door manners at the outlay of one penny in the park, than from the most expensive and misleading treatise on polite behaviour. A single afternoon's instruction in bowing—from the serene and stately brow-inclination of a countess to a Foreign Office clerk, up to the beaming and effusive mandarin movement of a Belgravian mother to a prospective duke—would be alone worth the money.

Various spectators will hold differing opinions as to the geography of the chair from which the best pennyworth of park may be obtained: some electing to sit with the back to Piccadilly; others voting for one of the single rank of seats to the right of the drive, close to Albert Gate and the house of the French ambassador; and a section being in favour of a stall commanding an uninterrupted view of the Row. For my own part I prefer to enjoy the economical delight to be indulged in

at the eastern junction of the drives and the Row; and to the coachless student of manners the advantages of this position will be manifest and manifold. When the jaded economist tires of looking at others' good fortune, the way out is close at hand; in the event of rain coming on several lines of omnibuses ply within a stone's throw; and, greatest and best of benefits, by a judicious manipulation of one's seat three separate views may be commanded, thereby effecting a clear saving of twopence.

Come, then, dear sir or madam, and sit beside me on one of the seats facing Piccadilly, and having Apsley House on our immediate left. A slight glance of the eye over the right shoulder, and you may see down the brown dip of the Row Kensingtonward; or, if it does not inconvenience you to turn the head itself to the right, your vision may be gratified with the branching elms, the undulating sward, the firs and cacti and rhododendrons of the sweeping background. Our present business, however, is with the few yards of drab road in front of us—the outer drive, the microcosm of the afternoon park. Presently we shall turn our chairs and face the Row, and listen to the hard breathing of the horses, and watch the swiftly flung and falling atoms of earth spurned of their feet, and follow the riders—man, woman, and child—often admiring, sometimes smiling, but, as we are gentlefolk—though haply poor—never envious.

I fancy I have read, perhaps once or twice, and in some other print than this, that Hyde Park on a summer's afternoon is an incomparable sight, and I seem to recollect the words, "rank and fashion, wealth and beauty," and such stock phrases. But you and I see in it much more than that. As we look up at the blue sky, and lower down, but high over us, at the slanting sunlight gilding the fresh green of the whispering elms, we hear, above the din of the carriage-wheels and the beat of the hoofs on the road, the song of Excelsior. The gay, or seemingly gay, crowd on horseback and in coaches have attained what many of the foot-people aspire to. But the moral is trite: though we climb up the hill of fortune never so bravely, not one of us shall reach the top and feel that the world lies at our feet.

Miss Blondelace, mercer's assistant out of employment, shapely, pretty, and almost like a lady in appearance, has heard of

the park, and wandered into it this afternoon. Miss Blondelace has paid her penny, and sits with wide-open eyes staring at the show. Of all her more favoured sisters rolling by she most admires one, tall, and fair, and straight, sitting upright in a phaeton, driving a pair of high-stepping chestnuts. The lady is alone, but for a defiant-looking groom, with arms crossed, perched behind her. My poor little Blondelace, you don't know when you are well off. To-night, when you kneel upon your little carpet hassock, and look up at your little bed's head and read: "Be the day weary or be the day long, at length it ringeth to evensong;" be thankful that an evensong may yet sound comfortably in your ears, and forget the beautiful lady and her bought complexion.

When I look upon all these well-bred, well-groomed horses, my democratic sympathies are shocked. All men may be equal, but I am quite sure that all horses are not so. No equine school-board could develop *Farmes Giles's* strong patient *Dobbin* into yonder delicate-headed red-roan giant. The large, bull-necked, small-eyed millionaire, lolling in the brongham drawn by the red-roan, sickens for a baronetcy, drives in the park to be seen of men, hangs on to the skirts of society, and though provided with all the material luxury which wealth can bring, frets because his own pedigree will not compare with that of his horse.

In my opinion, the man with the leather valise, who so assiduously collects our penny chair rents, ought to be provided with some rankometers for the use of his tenants; for, armed with such an unfailing and useful instrument, the uninitiated spectator would be able to distinguish between a Cabinet minister and a retired cheese-monger at a glance. The marchioness of my imagination is a stout, blonde, benignant lady of some forty summers. Her forehead is broad and low, her nose thin and high, her mouth sweet and full, and she should be possessed of at least two chins. My marchioness drives in a state-coach; a fat periwigged coachman sits deep down on a hammer-cloth, in front and behind two *Anakim* in plush and pink silk-stockings pull at supposititious bell-ropes. Ah, there she comes! her coach-panels ablaze with heraldry. Alas! now I look more closely, that is not my marchioness at all, but plain Mrs. Shadrach, from Maida Vale; a lady whose orientally descended lord made a fortune by purchasing emigrants' land-

tickets at an awful reduction in a distant colony. The park without a rankometer is worse than the theatre without a play-bill; for from a penny stall you have to construct the plot for yourself, and that is well-nigh impossible, unless some clue is afforded by which to identify the characters.

No doubt there are dukes and duchesses, earls and countesses, and lords and ladies of high degree scattered around in wasteful profusion. But there are also honest citizens and citizens who are not honest, lawyers and singers, authors and actors, and gamblers, and even professional entertainers, whose fine powers of mimicry enable them to affect an air of the highest ton.

I recollect *Jowler* the journalist when, as the London correspondent of the *Mudcombe-in-the-Marsh Advertiser*, he weekly prattled the secrets of the then prime minister, and the latest scandals in high life, from a fourth floor back room in *Lyon's Inn*. *Jowler* was even then a man of powerful imagination, although he knew not the prime minister, and was ignorant of society and its scandals. Since then my friend has blossomed into notoriety and well-paid fiction. And, behold, as we sit in our penny chairs, *Jowler* goes by on a big horse and bows—positively bows and is bowed to by the now prime minister. A worthy person from the provinces, who recognises the earl from his photograph, but to whom the features of my friend are strange, mistakes him for a privy councillor at least. If *Jowler* did but know of that provincial's error, he would arch his neck more proudly than that of the big horse which he bestrides with such well-affected unconcern.

"That's a magnificent animal," says the Mayor of *Petersham*, addressing a curly-headed youth, his son, home for the holidays from a *Highgate* academy, and dressed in a tall hat and short jacket in imitation of an *Eton* boy. "That's a magnificent animal," repeats the M. of P., "and I should not be surprised if the gentleman riding of him was somebody." The Mayor of *Petersham* is not far wrong. The animal pointed at is a splendid specimen of a churchman's cob, and the "gentleman riding of him" is "somebody"; is, indeed, a well-known horsedealer, fishing with live-bait for a bishop, or at least for a wealthy rural dean.

"All the people in the park cannot be impostors; they cannot all be bad," I seem to hear some unfriendly critic say. They

are not all impostors, but the majority pretend to be what they are not. It is a fault common to humanity—particularly in the park. Would you have Mrs. Plum, the wholesale grocer's lady, paint her husband's business upon her carriage-door? Believe me, it is too much to expect. Would you have our peers ride dressed in their ermine and coronets? No; they prefer the ease and comfort of plain garments at the expense of temporary obscurity.

I once knew a clerk in a government office, a small fellow named Wiggins, who bore a striking resemblance to the late Marquis of Sloane Square, a noted man of fashion a couple of decades ago. Well, my clerkly acquaintance used, every fine afternoon after the office was closed, to saunter up the Strand from Somerset House, and so on through Spring Gardens and the Mall, along Constitution Hill, across an angle of the Green Park, and into the Row, where he would stand for an hour or so leaning over the rail after the fashion of the period, happy if he succeeded in deceiving one single fellow-creature into the belief that he was the original Marquis of Sloane Square, and not a counterfeit. Wiggins was not a bad young fellow, and when he arrived home to his wife at Fulham, would considerably nurse the baby. The Wigginses are a large family, as you know.

But who within the compass of a single paper would attempt to sketch all the various humours of a scene fuller of changes than an April sky or a woman's temper? The very club-men, arm-in-arm, straight and sad, have a natural history all their own. Every day at twelve and five cohorts of idle gentlemen from Pall Mall and St. James's Street come forth to show themselves, and having performed that solemn social rite, return to adorn their favoured windows. From the window to the park, from the park to the window, they pass their honest, useless, vacant lives serenely. And when Death—a member of all the clubs—comes at last, let them be consoled by the thought that they have helped to make a tailor rich, and never, never wavered in their fealty to the park.

From his place against a tree, some little distance in the background, the pallid, shabby, once ambitious clerk watches the club-men go by as if they were wingless angels. Poor wretch! as he stands there, pipe in mouth, the bond-slave of idleness, you may see in him the human moth fluttering round the fashionable

candle. Long ago, when in respectable employment, he would neglect his duties to haunt the park and worship at the shrine of club-land. What though his god be false and his cultus a folly, inasmuch as he is a human sacrifice on the altar of fashion, let us pity him. The little children of the rich look up shyly into his fashion-yearning face, and pass on, laughing lightly at the "funny man." The clean and pretty children of the park lend a yellower tone to the sunshine, and an added grace to the scene, everywhere where misery is not. But these pink and yellow buds of life are heartless, and I scarcely wonder that the broken clerk—lost soul as he is—curses them for their childish cruelty.

But if the broken clerk has drawn down the corners of our mouths, the town-traveller in his hooded chaise must draw them up again. Serenely vulgar, and supremely proud, the town-traveller takes the park on his way from the wholesale solemnities of Wood Street to the retail frivolities of Kensington. The man who minds the chaise while the town-traveller takes or tries to take orders sits indifferently beside him, but the T. T. has an eye for all he sees. No lady's stomacher escapes him. He knows to a penny the value of the crape on the dress of a widow, and withal picks up hints on deportment, which, later on, he will impart to Cheapside.

Three persons meet from east and west before our chair, just as kindly Doctor Forceps drives by in his brougham, a convalescent patient beside him. Mamma and Mabel and Lieutenant Lackland stop and greet one another, smiling politely. Mamma is tall and dark and rich. Mabel is tall and fair and mamma's heiress; and the lieutenant—Lord Oasis's younger brother—is a friend of both ladies and the unspoken lover of Mabel. "Good morning," says mamma to the lieutenant. "You will be leaving us presently. Be sure you come and say good-bye." And Mabel looks at the man out of her large blue eyes—eyes full of love—only for a moment. "Yes," says she; "you must be sure to come and wish us good-bye; they say the Zulus are dreadful savages." And says mamma: "You must take care of yourself, and not catch cold, you know." "Thank you very much," said the lieutenant; "I shall be sure to call." And for half an instant he looks at Mabel as if his heart would break—for half an instant—just as long as it takes him to raise his hat in parting.

Now who would think that a pale passionate man lying awake on a bleak hill-side, with a steel-cold moon shining upon a camp, and arms piled all around, and his mind filled with the thoughts of a sweet pleading look, and on his lips the words, "If she did but know that I love her!" and a young woman kneeling on a low chair praying for a soldier on foreign service, and crying there in the silence of her room, "Oh, Lord, give him safely back to me!" who would think, I say, that those two were Lieutenant Lackland and Mabel?

What we see from a penny chair in the park often looks cold and formal; but the proudest dandy of them all sometimes has his eyes wet with tears in token of our common humanity.

MRS. MALLANDAINE'S PEACH-PARTY.

A STORY IN THREE CHAPTERS. CHAPTER I.

CHRISTMAS had been kept at Bearcroft with all due solemnity, and with a mixture of old and new customs most bewildering to a new chum.

To get up and dress at six on a balmy summer's morning; to go downstairs to breakfast, and be wished a "Merry Christmas" by your two pretty cousins in white dresses; to drive to church, and find it a bower of roses, lilies, and geraniums, supported by whole bushes of flax or Pampas grass, startlingly relieved by wreaths of holly with sealing-wax berries, and ivy, and yew; to hear the service read with doors set open to admit the soft summer breeze, and, with it, the view of a sunny churchyard-slope, and the scent of the pinks and roses set to bloom on the scattered graves; to go home to a dinner where the seasonable dainties, cold lamb, and strawberries and cream, face the legendary roast beef and plum-pudding; in the afternoon—a trifle too hot, perhaps, but still the perfection of lazy weather—to stroll out through the bush to the river, where the girls coax me to row them under the deeply hanging willows to the Ninety Mile Beach, where, when it's cool enough, we light a fire, and have a picnic tea-party; to finish the night with Sir Roger de Coverley and snap-dragon, and an iced loving-cup; were not all these things enough to make up a most bewildering Christmas to me, Hugh Campion, aged nineteen, who had never left England until six months before my story begins?

But while I was still trying to reconcile

the due enjoyment of a most unfettered gipsy life with "doing as they do at home," Christmas had passed, and we were preparing to welcome the New Year. "Hugh!" cried the elder of my girl-cousins as I met her one day in the garden; "come and see if the peaches are ready."

I obeyed, of course. In the first place, Molly Mallandaine is my cousin; then she is very pretty; and, again, I love peaches; so I followed her very willingly.

"I think they'll do by this day week," says Molly, very seriously, after we had perambulated the orchard, and she had pinched some of the fruit with an air of anxious criticism.

"Ready for what? Jam?" I ask, picking up one or two velvet-skinned peaches from the long grass and rank clover at our feet, and beginning an attack on them.

"Jam! No, child. Ready for our peach-party. Mother gives one every summer, and she sent me to see whether the peaches would be fit by this day week. I think they will, though they are not so forward as last year. Don't you have peach-parties in England, Hugh?"

"Never heard of them," I rejoin, as soon as I have freedom of utterance again. "What is it like?"

"Well," says Molly, sitting down on a fallen tree, and also attacking a monster "Slipstone," while I look down on her and think how very pretty colonial girls are; "first of all, we send out our invitations."

"So far, not unlike an English party," I put in.

"Of course, stupid! You mustn't interrupt. Then, when the day comes, our friends drive over about two o'clock with all the baskets and barrels they can bring; these they carry into the orchard and fill with peaches. When we have all done picking, we have supper and wind up with a dance."

"Then do the guests carry away all they can pick?"

"Certainly; why else should they come? It's fun to see the buggies so crammed with fruit that there's hardly room for the driver to sit! We mark certain trees we don't wish touched, or we shouldn't have a peach left for ourselves; altogether, I like peach-parties."

"And do all the people about give them in turn?" I ask.

"Mrs. Medd gives cherry-parties, because she has such fine cherry-trees; and Mrs. Talbot gave a gooseberry-party last year; it was very nice, but rather stooping work."

There is a pause, during which I can admire anew Molly's grace of posture, and the effect of the sunlight shining through green leaves on her dark brown hair.

Very tall for a girl of nineteen is my cousin Molly; with a figure to which constant outdoor exercise and hard indoor work have given a development unknown to her slim English sisters. When Molly's sleeves are tucked up in the morning, she shows a pair of round strong arms—with just a dimple here and there to vindicate her youth—which a duchess might be proud of; and even as she leans now under the peach-trees, her Quaker-like cotton gown shows to perfection her graceful curves and length of limb. Then she has a face which agrees well with her shape. Her skin is clear and pale, with no tinge of red but when she is moved in any great way; her nose is straight and unremarked, except when, as now, she is looking up, and you catch her pure profile; her eyes are those of a child, liquid grey, wide-opened, heavily-lashed, which meet yours with a frank question; a mouth which is no model, save for its dewy redness; a head which she carries a little proudly, as if its dark coils and twists were a crown; there is Molly!

"Well, Hugh?" she says presently, looking up at me with a merry laugh: "for the last ten minutes you have been staring me out of countenance; what do you think of me after all?"

Molly is the same age as myself, and half an inch taller, and I am quite aware, in my dim boyish mind, that she has dormant powers and faculties which lie beyond my ken; so while I admire her fervently, I am always the least bit afraid of Molly. I tell her, therefore, not that I was admiring her, a confession she would receive with unmixed amusement, but that I was thinking of home. One little weakness I have discovered in my pretty cousin who holds her own so well—she is very eager to be in all things as like an English girl as possible. I am an authority, as I have only just come out, and I love to call up that wistful look in her eyes, and to have her hang on my decision in all matters of importance.

"I suppose it is all very different out here," she is saying now. "I do wish father would take us home for a year or two, just to see what England is like. You know I was brought here as a baby, and the others were all born out here."

"You wouldn't like England a bit,"

I answer with the air of a travelled man. "There you couldn't run out into the paddocks and catch your own horse, saddle and groom him; no picnics for two or three days on the hills, no peach-parties, no campings-out! It would be thought dreadfully improper, too, if you were out—on the river, for instance—after sundown with a fellow, unless your mother went with you."

My words have succeeded in bringing a pink flush to Molly's cheeks, and she suddenly flashes an indignant and surprised glance at me. Last week Geoffrey Meredyth and Molly rowed up to the beach by moonlight, leaving Sybil and me to walk the long way round. I feel I owe Molly a thrust for so quietly throwing me over. But the flush fades before we leave the orchard, and Molly recovers her usual serene bearing. "You know, Hugh, we have known Mr. Meredyth for a long time, and we look on him almost as one of our own boys, he living so close, and being father's tenant at Long Point Farm; all that makes a great difference, don't you see?"

She says this in a very stately voice; but there is a pleading look in her eyes, and I cannot bear to distress her.

"Of course it makes a difference," I declare. "I was only in joke. Why, Geof Meredyth's a regular elder brother to you all; and such a favourite with your father too."

"I never could see why you might be out with a person all the morning—shelling beans, say—and yet be blamed if you went for a little row on the river when the moon was shining," went on Molly, in a lighter tone. "That is nonsense, isn't it, Hugh?"

"Of course it is! By-the-bye, is Meredyth to come to the peach-party?"

"Oh, yes," says Molly, stooping to gather a bunch of carnations, which she ties with a blade of grass and sticks in my coat; "even if he doesn't want the peaches, he is sure to come and help the other people."

"How long have you known him?" I ask, more from a lazy pleasure in gratifying Molly than from any great interest in Meredyth himself.

"Let me see—it was the winter Jack had that bad fever—it must be five years ago now; father had met him on board one of the coasting steamers, and liked him, so he invited him to come to the station whenever he liked. Mr. Meredyth did come, and stayed some weeks. And, oh, Hugh; he was so kind when Jack was

so ill. Then afterwards he settled to take Long Point Farm, and he has lived there ever since. We must walk over some evening and have tea with him," went on Molly brightly; "he has made the old homestead very comfortable, and he has a jewel of a housekeeper in old Mrs. Baynes. Sybil and I used often to go over, but we haven't lately. Mr. Meredyth seems altered, I think; he never asks us there, and he only comes here when father happens to meet and bring him. Mother asked him once if he had had news about his friends at home, but he told her he had no friends except ourselves. That does seem so lonely," added Molly softly, speaking more to herself than to me. A few more paces brought us in front of the verandah.

Mrs. Mallandaine and her younger daughter Sybil are sitting at one of the drawing-room windows writing.

"Well, mother mine," says Molly, leaning her elbows on the sill and looking in, "we have inspected the peaches, and we think they will be quite fit for picking next Wednesday; so you can put the date in your notes at once. Hugh has eaten seven of those large Slipstones, so his opinion is worth having. Let us come in, dear, and take a turn at writing; you ought to rest your eyes, I'm sure. Are all these for the Burnside folks?"

"Molly," bursts in Sybil, in the shrill treble of fourteen, "do come and do these last four notes for me; my fingers are getting quite stiff, and it's so stupid putting just the same thing over and over again. Besides, I want to go to the yard and see if the boys have come back yet. Come on, Hugh; I'll race you to the gate."

"Sybil! Sybil!" cries her mother; but Sybil is out of earshot.

"We will ride round with all these Burnside notes, if Hugh likes, this afternoon," says Molly, scribbling. "If you are going to the yard, just tell one of the boys to catch up Ruby, and to put her in one of the stalls for me; and I advise you to do the same by Whitefoot—it's such hot work after dinner, racing round and round the paddocks."

I assent, and go my ways after Sybil.

CHAPTER II.

BEARCROFT is a very unusual sample of a colonial house; in fact, looking at it from a short distance, and seeing it surrounded by well cultured gardens, and embowered in luxuriant shrubs and trees, you might fancy yourself approaching a small squire's

house in a flat part of Hampshire, for instance. But then you would, as you drew nearer, notice the spacious verandah, forming almost a summer parlour, where Sybil kept her pets—a pair of tuis, in a wicker cage of Jack's own make, a little brown "morepork" owl, and a tank of curious creatures collected on the beach at different times. Then, here and there, among veritable lilacs and laurels, your eye might light on the scarlet rata, and the star-like bush clematis, and the large-berried fuchsia, and all round and above the verandah-pillars, and hanging in festoons about the windows, you could remark a most un-English luxuriance of passion-flowers, and myrtles, and jessamine, while monster scarlet geraniums are trained against every inch of stable-wall, and are mercilessly pruned and clipped every year to keep them down. No; assuredly we are not in dear old England, you say, as you look more closely at Bearcroft and its lovely gardens. To-day the whole place looks brighter, if possible, than usual, for groups of merry folks are standing and walking about, and Mrs. Mallandaine stands in the verandah receiving her guests. She is a tall grave-eyed woman, tempered, but not soured, by her twenty years of colonial life; self-possessed and ready-witted she is, but never sharp or quick in speech or judgment. She is supremely indifferent to all the luxuries she has learnt to do without, although now she has them in plenty; with an ever-deepening sense of the insignificance of outward things, and the transitoriness of all merely earthly conditions, which makes her seem to be constantly looking above every question, and deciding it from a higher standpoint than others.

She is not a woman to indulge in caresses, or caressing words often, yet never did woman care for husband and children with a more rooted affection. The great griefs of her life, the death of three sons in quick succession, had scarcely abated her natural cheerfulness: "My sorrow will last as long as life does," she said to a friend who expressed admiration at her power of endurance; "it will be part of my daily bread; why should I give up an hour to dwelling on it?" Yet there were moments when a tone in Jack's voice, or the sight of something the lost boys had used or handled, would whiten her cheek, and send a pang of anguish through her heart, but to the outer world she gave no sign.

Standing to welcome her guests, she looks, this summer day, a very comely gentlewoman in her soft pearly Cashmere shawl and lace cap; and Molly, looking as her mother must have looked in her girlhood, flashes hither and thither with cups of coffee and piles of dainty cakes, and a jest and a smile for all.

The rustle of freshly-starched skirts, the waving of ribbons and feathers, the babble of voices, varied by an occasional roar from an aggrieved baby, become confusing; and I am glad when the word is given for the serious business of the day to commence, and the company move off in the direction of the orchard.

"Now, Mr. Campion, I expect you to look after my baby for me," said little Mrs. Aubrey, fastening on my arm with a merry smile in her dark eyes which no poverty has been able to quench. Who, to look at her, slim, graceful, becomingly dressed, would guess at the drudgery of her daily life, or the shifts she has recourse to to find bread and butter for the six little ones at home. But Mrs. Mallandaine knows the secrets of that household, as of many others, and her eyes notice how thin the little woman has become, and how the lines are deepening round eye and mouth.

"I've got a snug corner for baby on the sofa," she says, taking the little bundle into her kind arms. "Hugh shall pick for you to-day, while you come and have a quiet chat with me in the cool drawing-room. I want to consult you about the girls' autumn dresses, and to show you some beautiful serge I have just had sent me from home. There is far more than we shall use, and I thought we might cut out some little frocks for your twins if you like the colour. Come and look at it, my dear, while baby's quiet."

"Hugh," says Molly, coming up, "are you going to pick for Mrs. Aubrey? So will I; I like picking for her, for I know how the little ones enjoy the jam and jelly she makes so well. Jack, run and help Miss Crawley with that heavy tub, and mind you find her the finest peaches, that's a good boy!"

Molly and I pass through the gate with Mrs. Aubrey's great baskets swinging between us, and look round for a tree—where shall we begin?

"This will do, I think," says Molly, coming to a standstill under a giant whose spreading branches are weighted with downy fruit; "but while you begin I must go round and see if everyone is suited."

I begin as ordered, but soon leave off to look down on the scene.

The orchard at Bearcroft is a long narrow field, the trees are well-grown, and the year is a good one for fruit of all kinds; the apples and plums are as plentiful as the peaches, and shine in the sunlight, purple or golden, among the thick green leaves. Up and down among the trees go groups of gaily dressed people, all bent on enjoying their holiday as well as gathering their harvest of fruit; the voices and laughter mingle with the fresh rustle of the leaves and the noisy ripple of the creek which forms a boundary on the north side.

At last Molly flits back to my tree. "Hugh, only three peaches! what have you been doing up there all this time?"

"Dreaming, Molly; you can't think what a quaint picture the orchard makes from this branch. But I'll pick in earnest now you are here to wake me up. Hulloa! here's Meredyth!"

Molly will not look up, but I catch the sudden flush which tinges even her round white throat at his name. Meredyth looks out of spirits and careworn, I fancy; he pauses at the gate to take a prolonged survey, hesitates, and has almost made up his mind to go over to old Miss Crawley, when Jack spies him, and shouts out: "Molly, here's Mr. Meredyth at last! Molly——"

So Molly is obliged to look up, and to greet the late comer. Ah, if she would only look at me with that shy gladness in her eyes, and that little quiver of the lip which tells so much! I look down from my perch among the leaves, and recognise, once more, how Molly has given her heart, without reserve, to this man. And Meredyth? He loves her too, unless I am much mistaken, and yet, to me, watching him with the jealous eyes of a young and very ardent rival, there is something strange in his bearing towards Molly. Sometimes, for weeks, he will not attempt to see her; then he will spend a whole day at her side, as if unable to tear himself away; I am certain he tried to avoid her just now, and yet now she has spoken to him, and given him one of her wistful looks, he stands looking down into her eyes, and talking in that low melancholy voice of his, as if he wanted to absorb her whole attention.

By-and-by they stroll off to another tree with one of Mrs. Aubrey's unfilled baskets, and I feel as if the beauty of the day had

suddenly clouded over, and the pretty idyllic scene beneath me had turned into veriest prose. Grumbling and castle-building by turns, I fill the basket to the brim, and then betake myself to a rustic seat close by to have a smoke. To enjoy my well-earned pipe more thoroughly I lie down full length, the overhanging boughs of a fuchsia hide me from the public eye, and I drop off presently into a consolatory nap. When I wake again, all the gay company seem to have melted away, only Jack and little Daisy Harper are tugging at a kit which they have over-filled, and which will not go through the gate. Close by me I hear Molly speaking: "Hugh must have gone in, I suppose; I can't see him anywhere. Isn't he a dear good fellow, Mr. Meredyth?"

"Molly," says Meredyth, in a voice which he is evidently struggling to keep calm and unexcited, "I wonder if you would understand if I told you something, something which is a cruel weight on me day and night, and yet I never thought much about it until lately. Sometimes I think I must tell you, and then, at other times, I think I would die first. It is then I stay away from Bearcroft for so long, and yet I always come back with the same insane longing to speak."

"Molly!" cries Jack, running back; "mother has sent me to look for you. It is time to see about supper, she says, and she can't find Syb anywhere."

"Coming, Jack," answers Molly, in a voice that will tremble a little, and Meredyth's chance is gone for the present.

"Clearly he was on the point of proposing," I say crossly to myself, as I yawn and stretch my arms, "and I'm very thankful Jack interrupted, for I've no wish to hear him go through his declaration. Rather an odd way of beginning though," I decide, and then I jump the fence, and by a short cut through the shrubbery arrive at the verandah five minutes before they appear in sight.

CHAPTER III.

"WHERE is Molly?" screamed Sybil, who is the first to catch sight of me as I mingle with the crowd of "pickers" grouped round the verandah and the open drawing-room windows.

"There she is," I answer, catching the wave of her white gown against the vivid scarlet blossoms of the rata which grows at the bend of the drive.

"Ah, yes; here she is," echoes Mrs.

Aubrey, as Molly, Geof Meredyth, and Jack appear more fully in view. "Now let us— Who on earth is that?"

The exclamation, and the altered tone of Mrs. Aubrey's voice, make all within earshot turn and look in the same direction, and there is a momentary lull in the Babel of talk. Jack is a little in advance of his sister, and is deeply interested apparently in cutting a whistle with his pocket-knife; but a few paces behind Meredyth is a woman whom none of us have observed before. Her appearance is so strikingly unlike that of any of Mrs. Mallandaine's guests, and her evident concentration of interest and intention on the pair before her is so strange, as to account for Mrs. Aubrey's exclamation of extreme surprise.

She is a tall powerful woman of perhaps five-and-forty, stout, and broad-shouldered; her face is coarsely handsome; black eyes, strongly marked eyebrows, a quantity of black hair untidily massed beneath her smart bonnet; her skin, originally, perhaps, a clear red and white, is now high coloured and coarse. Her walk is slightly unsteady, but she is sober enough to have a purpose and to stick to it; and that purpose evidently is to follow Meredyth, on whom her eyes are fixed with an expression of malicious hatred. Little Mrs. Aubrey looks, and then flashes a glance of intelligence at me.

"Some drunken tramp" she said carelessly, "who has strayed off the road. She must not be allowed to startle Molly. Hugh, you and I will go and turn her out quietly."

Mrs. Aubrey deposits the baby on the verandah as she speaks, but we are too late; for as we step on to the gravel of the drive, Molly, by some evil chance, turns her head, stops, and then Meredyth turns his, too, with a half-uttered word on his lips, and with a smile which is meant for Molly; but it does not reach her, it freezes into a ghastly look of horror as he sees the woman behind him.

"My God! have pity," he mutters, in a curious, half-choked voice, as he retreats a few steps, his face growing grey to the very lips.

"What is it?" asks Molly, looking bewildered and frightened from one to the other.

"No need to trouble you, my pretty young lady," says the stranger, in a high-pitched, unrefined voice; "my business is with the gentleman, and I needn't keep him five minutes—not five minutes,"

she repeats, shifting her hard black eyes from one face to another of the group.

Mrs. Aubrey links her arm in Molly's, and tries to draw her towards the house. "Come, darling," she says brightly, "we will leave Mr. Meredyth to see what this person wants, while we go and settle about the riding-party for next week."

But Molly has caught a vague alarm from Meredyth's set face, and does not listen. "What does this woman want?" she says, going close to his side, and looking wistfully up in his face. "Send her away, Geoffrey, she can have nothing to do with you."

The words reach the ear they were not intended for, and the woman bursts into a coarse laugh. "Nothing to do at all with him, my dear. Nothing at all, except that I am his wife—that's all."

Somehow, when the words are spoken, I seem to have known this for ages, and the sentence seems to repeat itself again and again in the dead silence which follows: "His wife—that's all! his wife!" Molly starts, and utters a little moan, as if someone had suddenly struck her; Meredyth turns away his head, and says not a word. Some of the people strolling about the garden are coming towards us, attracted by the sense that something unexpected is happening: "Who is that woman?" they are asking one another, while we can hear Sybil's shrill treble asking: "Why are Mrs. Aubrey and Molly standing about on the lawn, instead of coming to help mother with the supper? Do tell them, somebody."

"Meredyth!" I cry hastily, shaking his arm to rouse his attention, "do you hear what this miserable creature is saying about you? Contradict her, and send her off about her business."

"I cannot contradict her," he answers slowly, as if the words were wrung out of him against his will; "she has spoken the truth. Yes," he continues, raising his voice, and addressing the people who are hurrying to the spot, "that is my wife, friends. Look well at her, and listen to my story: Years ago, when I was a lad at Oxford, I was entrapped by her father and her brother, and induced to marry her. I have no one to thank but myself for the misery of my life, although she is twelve years my senior; I was a foolish, weak, conceited boy, and walked readily into the trap laid for me. I believed her to be a good and pure woman, and I married her. When I found out what

she was, I left her, and sailed within a week from England, but I made over my whole small fortune to her, on condition that I never saw her again. Out here I have tried to begin a new and happier life; I have worked hard, and lived peaceably among you—let any man say differently if he can—I have tried to redeem the one fatal error of my life, with but one wish, one prayer—that I might never behold that cursed face again. Who believes that a man is bound, by one rash word, to such a woman as that? Before Heaven, I repudiate her!" He flung up his arms as he said these words, with an indescribable gesture of despair, and turning his back on us, walked rapidly towards the bush. He had spoken with such concentration of passion, that we were all breathless and spellbound, and for a long minute no one stirred.

Then Molly turned to me and caught at my hand. "Hugh! come with me, quick, to the Gum-tree Walk—oh, Hugh, help me!" There was no withstanding her entreating eyes; the Gum-tree Walk was a short cut to the point for which Meredyth had made, and we should overtake him before he turned into the main road. Had I been older, I might have questioned the prudence of such a step on my cousin's part, but I was nineteen, and awfully sorry, I must confess, for Geoffrey Meredyth, so I clasped Molly's cold fingers in mine, and while everyone gathered round the loudly discoursing stranger, we slipped into the shade of the gum-trees, and ran swiftly to the lower end, where a road crossed ours.

Meredyth was coming quickly along with his head bent down, and till he reached the turn, he did not see us; then, when he looked up, and saw Molly, his whole aspect changed. I suppose the reaction from seeing himself arraigned before a censuring crowd, to reading his misery in the tender sorrow of Molly's eyes, broke him down quite, for he turned aside and covered his face with his hands. Molly stepped up to him, and took his hand between hers. "Geoffrey," she said earnestly, while the big tears rolled down her face, "dear Geoffrey, I wanted to tell you how I pity, and how I love you. I am not afraid to tell you, and Hugh hears me—I love you with my whole heart." Her voice quivered, but the lovely tender eyes still looked bravely up to his. "I may never see you again, Geoffrey, but that will make no difference, and when

you feel that you can hope no longer, you must still take heart, remembering that one woman loves and prays for you."

Ah, Molly, I could bear no longer to listen to your clear tones, passing such a cruel sentence on your youth; I left the dark avenue, and went out along the creek until you called me back, and I found Meredyth gone. Molly looked in my face with a poor attempt at a smile, which made my heart ache, as she took my arm and we turned towards home.

"It was God's mercy that made me think of the Gum-tree Walk," she said softly; "for, think of it, Hugh, he was going to kill himself when we met him. Now he has promised, and I know he will keep his word."

I did not ask her what he had promised; the whole thing seemed to me too miserable to be talked about; I could only listen with fresh pain to Molly's quivering voice.

"He is going to Christchurch to-night, and then on to Melbourne—he will write to father fully from there. He doesn't know yet where he will go then, but I have asked him once a year—on New Year's Eve—to write to me always to say where he is, and whether he is well, and—content. It was a good thing I came to the Gum-tree Walk, Hugh."

"What are we to do now?" I ask presently, as we emerge on the lawn.

"We must try and get through the evening as if nothing had happened," answers Molly wearily; "it will be best to make no difference for everyone's sake."

"I have been looking out for you, dear Molly," cries little Mrs. Aubrey, coming up to us, "to tell you that that person has been packed off at last. My husband got out our buggy, and, whether she liked it or no, we bustled her in, and he has driven her to Benton's station. Benton's wife will keep her there for a day or two, and then Tom was to ask her to send the creature on to Port Lyttleton. I thought that was the best thing to do with her. Of course, everybody's chattering about all this, but they'll soon forget it. Sybil and I hurried them indoors to prepare for supper, and, fortunately, my precious baby swallowed a peach-stone, and that gave quite a fresh turn to their thoughts. We can slip upstairs to your room, Molly, unseen, and you and I will come down together, and no more need be said."

Poor pretty Molly! what a hard fight she had all that weary evening to keep the aching sorrow of her heart out of eyes

and voice. She managed bravely, too, till the last buggy had driven off in the clear moonlight, and she came to say good-night to me. I caught a glimpse of a broken heart as she leant on my shoulder for a moment, and whispered: "Hugh! Hugh! how can I bear the long years to come?"

But sorrow has been merciful to Molly Mallandaine as to all who bring a stout heart to meet it; all the ten years which have slipped by since that momentous evening have found her even-tempered and cheerful. It is only the night before the new year that she grows restless and troubled, Sybil and I have noticed; and when we bring our children to Bearcroft to spend Christmas, she never takes them to play in the Gum-tree Walk; she says the trees are gloomy, and she does not like to see the little ones under them.

A wasted youth, some would say, but Molly does not think so, as year by year her letter comes, bringing tidings of the life she rescued from despair.

INTEREST AND INVESTMENTS.

It was only in a civilised or quasi-civilised society that the very idea of an investment, as such, could take root. Savage life is, at the best, a scramble. The Zulu, who knows no property but his cows or his millet-patch, or the Sioux, who cannot live through the terrible prairie winter without the supply of smoked bison beef that his arrows procure, has no savings to invest. In modern Mohammedan countries the only bank is the earth; and the one notion of the trembling cultivator, who has scraped together a few heaps of greasy silver coins, is to deposit the hoard in a sealed jar, and to bury it, under cloud of night, beneath his gourds and tuberoses. The very earliest investments, those of the Hebrews, and of those Egyptians from whom the Jews learnt so much, took the crude form of money-lending on a pledge.

Money-lending, in its first rude shape, constituted a terrible engine of oppression. The humane laws of Moses mitigated the harshness of Jewish creditors as regarded pawn or mortgage. At the Jubilee the pledged field or vineyard was to be restored. Before nightfall the pawned mantle had to be given back to the needy debtor, who might otherwise have perished in the cold Syrian night that comes after the fiery Syrian day. But in Rome, where high-born usurers composed the legislature,

cruel laws gave over the plebeian borrower, body and mind, wife and children, to the noble money-lender. It is difficult to conceive a more galling yoke than that of a proud and privileged class, whose members, with all the vices of an aristocracy, were yet hardheaded men of business, and were allowed to incarcerate the families of defaulters in a private jail, where torture and starvation were everyday events.

In mediæval times there were no investments, and, it may be added, no money to invest, save in the Italian city republics and in Byzantium. The Crusaders, who pawned their good acres for the bezants and florins that were to fit them out for the Holy Land, borrowed from Lombards or Jews, who derived the necessary funds from prudent Florence or lordly Venice. In half reconquered Spain, too, if a don of bluest blood had urgent need for hard cash, it was to a Moor that he went to ask for it; nor should we have heard so much of the cruelty of King Pedro the Cruel, had not that arbitrary monarch had the inconvenient practice of compelling his courtiers to pay their debts to turbaned creditors. One reason for the provisions of our ungallant English common law, under the head of *baron et feme*, is that if a wife's property had not vested absolutely in her husband, there would have been no use for it. Trustees and neatly drawn settlements were an impossibility in those rough times when Plantagenets reigned over us, and when the linen, or the yarn, or the gold broad pieces that formed the dowry, were pressed into immediate service.

The two first real investments were the Mississippi Scheme in France, and in England the South Sea Company. Not that these were by any means the first specimens of joint-stock enterprise. On the contrary, mines had been worked, shafts sunk, and ore raised, by the help of clubbed contributions; while the Virginian venture, and Raleigh's wild buccaneering attempts to snatch away a slice of the rich cake from greedy Spain, were supported by the money of subscribers. But in all these a definite issue had been placed before the eyes of those who took shares in the concern. To bring to light Derbyshire lead or Cornish tin and copper, to grow tobacco beside the James River, or capture the Plate Fleet, was an object which every-one could understand.

The great peculiarity of the Mississippi project was that its uniferous attractions were taken on trust by tens of thousands,

who neither knew, nor cared to know, anything of the resources of the far-off region with which it was nominally connected. Of the myriads who rushed to the Rue Quincampoix, as to a Parisian Tom Tiddler's Ground, scrambling and jostling for the gold and silver, few wasted a thought on distant Louisiana, with its real plantations and possible mines, or on the furs and copper to be bought for strings of beads from promising Indian catechumens of the prairies to the north. It was enough that his highness the regent smiled upon the scheme, that court ladies and financiers and dignified bishops had gone mad over the scuffle for shares. No wonder that the infection spread among the usually prudent bourgeoisie of the capital, and from them to artisans and servants, until the scrip of the new company came to be literally fought for by horny-handed men, who stood all night around the brokers' doors to be among the earliest candidates in the morning.

In the early days of the reign of our own George the Third the first stock-jobbers made their timid appearance on 'Change. It was into very shallow water, like little children dabbling in the sea, that these beginners ventured. These suckling financiers were in truth called into being by the rapid growth of that strange National Debt which dates from the year of the happy Restoration, 1661, and which had matured already, like the gourd of Jonah, to dimensions which our simple-minded ancestors deemed portentous. There was war, fierce but fitful, between the mother country and her rebellious children in America; and war, besides, between our own government and the Bourbon dynasties of France and Spain; and constant borrowings and lendings went on to keep sluggish Britannia abreast of revolted colonists and hereditary foes. England fought then, as now, in a very slovenly fashion. At one moment retrenchment was the cry, and valuable regiments were disbanded to rob or starve; while at another every available guinea was snatched at to buy up Hessian mercenaries, who went to war as willingly as the negro slaves who were daily landed in Jamaica went to work. Those were good times to foster the nascent Hercules of the Stock Exchange.

During the long and desperate contest with Napoleon, emperor and king, the fluctuations of the British funds were such

as we never dream of in these halcyon days, when a certain sacredness attaches itself to the very idea of Consols, and the pulse of the national credit beats with almost apathetic calm. It is difficult to conjecture what would be the rush to sell, nowadays, with a mutinous fleet threatening to burn down London, with frantic mobs shouting, in torchlight procession, for bread or blood, and with a flushed enemy encamped in sight of our shores. We are certainly more easy to alarm than were our forefathers, who never seemed to be quite aware of the perils that surrounded them. Still, if Pitt and Percival and Addington could have borrowed enough at three per cent., there would never have been those five which tempted forth the savings of yeoman and mill-owner.

Foreign stocks, now so important, were of small account in our London market until the commercial inflation of a few years ago. No British subject, we may safely say, burned his insular fingers with those French assignats, which gradually declined in value until it took bank-paper to the amount of a hundred and fifty livres to buy the simplest breakfast at a modest restaurant on the boulevards or the Palais Royal. The Dutch funds, previous to the overrunning of the Netherlands by the shoeless levies of the Jacobin Republic, were, indeed, held in respect, for the credit of the Hogan Mogans was deservedly good, and so was that of decaying Venice and defenceless Genoa. But John Bull is slow to learn a new lesson, and for the first few decades of the present century he considered the continent of Europe merely as a place where cheap living and cheap education might be found, but not at all as one which afforded a secure investment for the cherished capital which fructified within the sea-girt limits of England.

It was during the railway mania of some five-and-thirty years since, when Mississippi Law's spirit seemed to walk abroad, and a sudden thirst to grow rich urged the quietest and least likely people to plunge into Capel Court and take keen interest in the battle of the gauges, that stock-jobbing first donned the seven-league boots in which it has since continued its ambitious progress. Probably many a glib promoter, who won his spurs as advocate for some perfectly impossible line, made, like the razors of Gay's roguish pedlar, to sell, presently blossomed into the envied director of some gold-compelling credit company or fire-new bank. A vigo-

rous capacity for self-assertion, a good presence, and a confident address, were so often accepted as sterling merits, that most veterans of the City could name with bated breath a dozen firms which began with an empty till and fittings unpaid for, which have had the handling of hundreds of thousands of other people's money, have survived the toppling down of many a honoured house of business, and continue to all appearance prosperous even in these latter days.

Spain was the first to dip her swarthy fingers in John Bull's jealously guarded cash-box. Then Pennsylvania and one or two other Transatlantic borrowers followed suit; and for several years the names of Repudiation and Spanish Deferred were used as scarecrows to warn off speculators from putting trust in aliens. Presently, as trade grew, and a plethora of wealth succeeded to the lean years that preceded the repeal of the Corn Laws, a general confidence in the promising foreigner took the place of sour suspicion.

There was quite an artless belief in the glowing language of this or that prospectus pointing out the merits of some deserving community, industrious, intelligent, and law-abiding, which needed nothing but a paltry million or so to develop the resources of the earthly Eden, rich in soil, climate, minerals, wood, and water, which it had the good luck to inhabit. It was pleasant to derive a thumping income from an investment which was at once prudent and philanthropic.

It was but in a bashful and tentative fashion that our Mohammedan contemporaries made their first appearance in the money-market. Borrowing is not exactly in accordance with the spirit of the East. From the days of ancient satraps down to those of modern mirzas, khans, and pashas, the impulse of an Oriental in authority, when he hears that his humble neighbour possesses a pot of money, is to take it, not to borrow it. It was not immediately that the Turk and Egyptian could learn that the two processes, though differing in form, might produce identical results. Another difficulty at first presented itself to the half-opened minds of the turbaned novices in finance. They might wish to borrow, but they hardly dared in early times to hope that anyone would lend. Apt pupils, they soon learned that there was scarcely any limits to the wealth or the credulity of the Giaour. A practical nine or ten per

cent. was the resistless talisman with which they conjured, as—so long as by any robbery or hocus pocus the half-yearly coupons of interest could be punctually paid—the whole machinery moved with well-oiled wheels. At last the strain became too great; the bastinado itself broke down; rayah and fellah could be shorn no closer; and now the Caliph Haroun himself would find it hard to screw another sixpence out of the once confiding population of London or Paris.

It is very hard, now that Imperial Ottomans and Dairas are out of fashion, to discover an investment which shall return a high rate of interest and not be rotten at the core. South American republics may now in vain woo the stony-hearted British capitalist. There is one honest one among them, but Chili has to wage a doubtful war against superior strength. The overgrown empire of Brazil, with its indolent people, heavy heat, and soil that alternates between a pebbly desert and a tropical morass, is as a giant weak at the knees. And yet the modest dole which Britannia, for instance, pays through the agency of the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street, is every year more and more regarded as a London cabman is apt to eye his bare fare. And if Englishmen, and, still more, Englishwomen, are discontented with a little more than three per cent., so are Frenchmen with a little less than five, which their own government securities still yield them. Everywhere safety is to be found in precisely the inverse ratio to profit.

The money market, like most individuals and some corporations, has its caprices. Surprise has often been expressed at the favour shown to Austrian Stock, and at the indulgence extended towards a country that has been twice bankrupt, and is never in easy circumstances. Probably there are personal reasons for this preference. The mighty financiers, Tritons among the minnows of the Bourse, who render wars possible and dictate conditions to kings, are but mortal after all, and have a weakness for titles of nobility and for the insignia of knightly orders, and at Vienna such baubles are granted with a judicious liberality that deserves and secures the goodwill of the recipients.

Launching a foreign loan in these times is quite as scientific an operation as launching a ship. The pulse of the Exchange is felt by the daintiest pressure of practised fingers. Little balloons, in the shape of newspaper paragraphs, are sent up to

ascertain whither tend the fickle currents of public opinion. Bankers are canvassed, credit societies wheedled, and the screw put on needy firms whose loose paper floats on the surface of the commercial tide, to ensure the taking up of a colourable quantity of stock. Then comes an authoritative flourish of trumpets, announcing that H.M. Prester John, or the President of Rio Ladrone, bucklered by half-a-dozen German-Jewish counts and barons, whose very names suggest wealth untold, will stand no nonsense from the public concerning the new Six per Cents. They are to be issued at eighty-six, they will rise steadily in price, and, to prevent disappointment, applications should be made in the course of a week or ten days at latest, after which the Prester John or Rio Ladrone Sixes may be expected to rise beyond the reach of middle-class men. And, after all, we often see the advertisement withdrawn, and the sputtering firework of finance fall unheeded to the ground.

Tempting offers are yet put forth, more or less specious of their kind, in America, as in England, France, or Italy, of ten, twelve, or fifteen per hundred invested in some private undertaking of the limited liability class. But it is only on a small scale that these chances are offered to the apparently enormous number of small capitalists whose unproductive means lie idle for lack of some employment that shall be at once remunerative and safe. Unluckily it is as hard now, as it was in the days when the Duke of Wellington uttered his famous aphorism, to dissociate the ideas of high interest and bad security.

MY LAND OF BEULAH.

A STORY IN FIFTEEN CHAPTERS. CHAPTER XIII.

THE winter, with its short days and long delightful evenings, had passed away. I say "delightful" advisedly, for in truth no colder word would describe them aright. For the most part we used to sit in the snuggerly; auntie and I with our work; and Royal sometimes chatting with us, sometimes reading aloud in that sweet yet sonorous voice, that was one of his greatest charms. Thus it came about that when auntie said casually, "How the days are beginning to lengthen out!" I sighed.

We had paid a visit to Royal's studio. We had had tea out of cups without handles—priceless gems of old china, and eaten cake off plates that looked as if they ought to be framed for pictures. I had

noticed a group of gardenias in a tall and slender vase of Bohemian glass the colour of imprisoned sunshine, and wondered if Mr. Drew had put them there because I had said they were my favourite flowers? We had admired the perfect taste of all the appointments of his house, and then, just as this pleasantest of visits was coming to an end, a strange thing happened, and the sad past, that I was forgetting in the happy present, came up before me once again.

Aunt Ida and her adopted son were holding a disputation over a certain ancient vase of great ugliness and inestimable value, and I, wandering from one picturesque room to another, took to enjoying myself in my own way. First one snatch of a song, and then another, rose to my lips, and was crooned very softly to myself, until at length I drifted into the old song unawares:

"Te souviens tu Marie,
De notre enfance—"

Then I stopped short, and uttered a sound that was half a sob and half a cry.

There before me was a small round painting framed in ebony—only vine leaves, their green just veined here and there and tipped with vivid red, the whole forming a background for a woman's face. In an instant I seemed to be back in my Land of Beulah, back in the wood behind the coppice, sitting by the babbling brook. I seemed to see a mass of leaves whereon hung ripe, ruddy-tinted bunches of hazelnuts, and against the mingled green and red a woman's face—the face of my false friend, Eulalie. Could this be some chance likeness? Yes, it must be so; and yet, who that had not seen her could have so well caught the sad appealing sweetness of the soft dark eyes; the lovely lines of the small, close-braided head; the tender smile I knew so well—too well, alas! not to know it for a silent lie? "It is some chance likeness, but auntie must not see the picture. She will say something dreadful—something that I could not bear to hear said of papa's wife." And, thinking thus, I hurried back to the corridor, where still those two disputed about the ugly vase.

"Are you tired, childie?" said Aunt Ida, in the brougham, on our way home. She might well ask, for every word I spoke was an effort, and my head ached miserably.

"I shall never take you to Roy's studio again," said Aunt Ida that evening; "I don't believe they half ventilate their dwellings."

"They" stood for that art brotherhood

to which Royal Drew belonged, though auntie would incense his feelings by speaking of him as an "amateur."

"You were a 'struggling artist' once, Roy," she would say, with a gleam of fun in her eyes; "but since you have had a fortune left you, you have become an amateur—a patron more than a student of art."

For within the last year or two a great change had come over Mr. Drew's fortunes, which had previously been remarkable rather for a want of fortune than a superabundance of it. Auntie said that the early years of effort had "done him good, braced him up, and made a man of him." Then she added: "He got into some trouble or other, too, and disappeared suddenly; took to wandering on the face of the earth, and picking up 'bits' in all sorts of outlandish places. There was a woman at the bottom of it all, my dear, there always is; and as I know nothing unworthy—nothing unfit for your ears or mine—could touch Roy's life, why she must have jilted him, whoever she was. I had not seen him for nearly two years, until he came strolling in the other day. If there is one thing a man hates more than another, it's a woman who asks questions. Bear that in mind, Nell, when you come to be a wife; half the unhappiness in married life comes from silly women prying into the trifles of a man's life, and so making him look back regretfully on the days of his liberty. I did not want Roy to hate me, so I asked nothing. I thought some day he would tell me all about it, but he never did; no doubt the woman was to blame, and he did not care to speak hardly of her."

The thought of this woman who had behaved ill to Royal was henceforth a blot upon my content. I tried not to hate her, but the attempt was less successful than it might have been. It was not jealousy that made my heart ache so sorely as I thought of her; it was the remembrance that she had made him suffer, and had driven him into a weary solitude.

"Was it while Royal was wandering about the world that this fortune was left to him?" I asked auntie suddenly one day.

"No," she said; "it was just before. I had seen that something was wrong, and hoped that his change of circumstances might fill his mind with new ambitions, driving out old sorrows."

"But it did not?"

"No; he seemed to grow more bitter, less like his own sunny self, every day.

'Now you will marry, Roy,' I said to him once; but I never said it again——"

"He did not like you saying it, you mean?"

"No. 'You think a woman might possibly look upon me as worth having now?' he said, Nell; and he said it with a scornful laugh, as if he despised all the women in the world. Soon after that he went away, and the studio that he had been so lavishly spending pains and money upon was shut up. Well, well! I ought not to talk about people being bitter and resentful. It was not long after Roy went away that I proved myself as quarrelsome an old woman as I had done once before."

"I won't have you speak like that!" I cried to her. "You are not a quarrelsome old woman."

"No, not now, child. There happens to be nothing to vex me, you see; so I can take refuge in the dignity of untempted virtue, which is always the most overpowering species of its kind, by-the-way."

I often thought of the love story that auntie had told me. There was something very touching in the love and tenderness that she gave to the son of the man she had loved, and loved in vain—a love, too, given, not for the sake of the old love only, but of the dear girl-friend who had been her unconscious rival.

Royal had told me of his father's death, that happened just as he himself stood upon the threshold of life; he told me of the misfortune that had clouded the man's life, as though, when Alice died, all prosperity for him died too; of the ill-health that obliged him to resign his post in India; of the ill-luck that pursued him in his after life; of the poverty in which he lived, and in which he died. He told me of Aunt Idumea seeing him at the picture-gallery, of his introduction to her, and the tender trouble in her face as she spoke to him. He was fighting hard with fortune in those days, and the friendship of the great London lady was as if a hand had been stretched out to some swimmer in a deep and troubled sea. Most touching record of all, he told me of her secret confession to him in the summer gloom of an evening never to be forgotten. "Roy, I loved your father, long ago; when I was a girl. He is dead now, and there is no shame in saying that my heart was his, and is now his son's for the sake of past days." Never, said Roy, had any man such a friend as Aunt Idumea had been to him. "I am a quarrelsome old woman," she had said, "and have

quarrelled with my only kith and kin. I have no children to brighten my old age; Roy, be a son to me; try to think of me, not as a cross old woman, but as one who loved your father, and was your mother's dearest friend."

All these things Royal told me, but there was a blank place in his life of which he never tried to fill in the lines.

Never, at least, until one day—a day in the spring that followed the winter that had been so happy.

The leaves upon the trees in the park were still so fresh and young, that they were half transparent, and were veined with tender red. The sunshine seemed to filter through them, as through a web of green; the birds on every bough sang high and clear; the water of the Serpentine shone like a sheet of glass, and a faint blue mist was stealing across its polished surface.

Royal and I were wandering side by side among all this spring beauty, sometimes speaking, sometimes silent, and, I fear, giving little heed to Pug and Frizzle, and being little on our guard against possible dog-stealers. It was a day such as makes the very fact of existence a blessing to be thankful for and jubilant over, and pervades one with a consciousness that the tiniest bird that flutters in the trees, the smallest insect that flutters in the grass, shares in one's own happy feeling.

As Roy and I paced near the water, we saw a poor woman, meanly clad, carrying a sick child in her arms. The little shrunken limbs hung limply down over the mother's arm; the wee white face looked quite too small for the hood that encircled it—it had shrunk a good deal since that hood was bought, I fancy—but the spring sunshine fell as brightly on the poor mother and child as on Roy and me, full of life, and with life stretching out fair before us.

We passed on, but my thoughts stayed behind with the sick baby. At last I turned back, and going up to the woman who now stood looking at the water, pleased to see her little one smiling at the antics of the ducks, I laid my hand upon her shoulder. "See," I said—timidly enough, for to hurt the feelings of the poor is a dreadful thing—"buy baby a dolly."

Aunt Ida was very liberal to me; I could well afford to help others; besides, my heart was so glad that day, and I wanted everyone else to be glad too.

The woman took the money I offered; and I saw, for the first time in my life,

that eager, hungry look upon a fellow-creature's face that is the outcome of a life that never knows what it is to have enough of anything.

"I can take her to the sea for a whole day for that, lady," she said, with a sort of sob.

She was very poor, and found it hard enough to fill her own mouth, let alone her child's; but the thought of taking the little sickly thing to breathe the fresh sea air for a whole day was one of rapture. I touched the baby's tiny face with my hand, and then, all at once, the shrunken limbs, the tattered clothing, the pinched white face, called up the memory of the dream-child—that ghostly visitant of which I never thought without a shudder. I hurried away from mother and child without another word, and, by the anxious look in Royal's eyes as I rejoined him, I knew that superstitious fear had sapped the colour from my cheek, and set my lips quivering.

"What is it?" he asked hotly. "Was she rude to you?"

"Rude?" I said, trying to speak quietly. "Oh, no; she was most grateful, poor soul. I think I am tired, Royal."

So we sat down on a bench that stood right under a giant tree. The leaf-shadows flickered gently at our feet; the birds twittered overhead; and, softened by distance, came the laughter and shouting of the children at play by the water. My fears died away, hushed and stilled by the calm beauty around me. Nay, in the very presence of the one who sat beside me was a sense of peace that would have quieted graver dreads than the mere haunting memory of the dream-child. Did Royal love me? Did I love Royal? The time was past now for me to put such questions to myself. When we sit in the sunshine, and feel its warmth, do we ask if the sun shines? When we hear the song of a thousand little voices in the branches, do we ask if the birds sing? Nay, we ask nothing—we know.

For a time Roy and I were silent; then, all at once, he turned his eyes upon me, and let me read there the old sweet story.

"Nell!" he said; then stopped, gave a quick glance round, and seeing that there was no one but the birds in the trees above us to pry into our proceedings, stole his hand on mine, and let it lie there hidden. I had no wish to stint him of his joy in reading in my own eyes the echo of the story told by his. Why should I? Well, there we sat, with Royal's hand on mine,

and the birds sang, and the sun shone, and the children's laughter sounded sweetly.

"Nell, do you know what you have done for me?" said Royal. Then, without waiting for a word from me, he added: "You have given me back a jewel that I had lost."

"A jewel you had lost?"

"Yes; my faith in women. Before I knew you I thought that there was neither truth nor honour to be found in a woman's nature."

"Who had taught you such a bad lesson as that, Royal?"

"Someone, Nell, who stole my heart away from me, and then trampled it underfoot. Would you care to hear the story, dear?"

That last little word, the first time I had ever heard it fall from Royal's lips, would have nerved me to do and hear anything.

But, surely, the tale was one to hurt in the telling, as in the hearing, for the dear burden of his hand no longer pressed on mine; the love-lit eyes were looking far away to where the pale blue mist crept along the water, and among the trees beyond it.

"I went mad once, Nell—mad for a woman's witchery and beauty; for the glamour of a smile; for the touch of lips that clung to mine in a kiss was only a wordless lie."

I shivered as he spoke—not with jealous hatred of the woman he had once loved; why should I have hated her for that? She stole nothing from me; I had no part in Royal's life then; but to think of how a woman had made him suffer, how a woman had been false to the truest heart that ever beat in a man's breast.

"I had run down to a country-place for a week's sketching. I was a poor man in those days with my way to make. I wanted to have time to throw my whole heart and soul into a picture that should make my name and fame, and in order to command this time, I wanted to paint some of those country nooks and corners that the public love to buy; for the pot must boil, even if there isn't very much in it. I was heavily weighted too, Nell, with more than the burden of my own life, for my father had left certain debts, and it was a point of honour that these should be paid. Well, I went to this country-place, painted this and that bit of sylvan beauty, and then, all at once, I painted no more landscapes, but only a woman's face—a soft dark face against a background of green leaves, as I had seen it first. This

woman was poor, and yet the simple dresses that she wore seemed to become her well, I thought. She used to come and stand at my shoulder, watching my brush move upon the canvas, and one day I said to her: 'You must not stand near me when I am at work, for the brush trembles in my hand with the beating of my heart.' A sweet, shy blush crept up into her cheek, but she did not look angry, and in a moment I had her in my arms, and her lips touched mine. After that day my life was one mad dream, and when I left her I said: 'I shall come again one day, and claim you for my wife; but we are both poor, and we must wait. I shall work with a brave heart now, for it will be for you.'

I was quivering from head to foot, and clung close to the hand that had again sought and found mine.

"I thought of her by day, I dreamt of her by night; I toiled at my art early and late; my work was sweeter to me than ever, dearly as I had always loved it. Then came a bright ray of sunshine, for I met Aunt Ida, and, for the sake of my father and my mother, she gave me a love such as I had never known before. I was so happy, Nell, in those days. I had not told my best friend about my love—indeed, she never knew that story. I had better end it quickly now, there's not much more of it. Just as I was working at the last touches of what I knew to be the best picture I had ever painted, and was counting the hours of daylight as a miser counts his gold, a letter came to me. It was a cruel letter; a letter that struck at the root of all my reverence for women—of all my faith in woman's love. She was not fit for a poor man's wife; she loved to have everything about her nice. She could even jest when she must have known my heart would be aching as I read her words. 'I think I am like a cat,' she said, 'that loves to lie on a silky rug in the warmth of the fire.' This letter she forwarded under cover from her cousin, for she did not wish me to know of her whereabouts, or to persecute her with letters; it might do her harm in her present position if I wrote at all. I must forget her; she thought it likely she should marry a man wealthy and titled, and such a fate was more fitting for her than becoming the wife of a struggling artist. There was a ring I had given her, Nell; a thing worthless in

itself, but precious for what it had symbolised. This, her letter told me, she had cast aside, and with it the memory of days that were very pleasant at the time, but best forgotten, as being but the folly of two silly people.

"Nell! men have been made murderers by such a letter as that. I think I had a murderer's heart in my breast for a time. I tried to write to her in spite of the prohibition she had put upon me. I sent one wild outbreak of upbraiding to the friend who had forwarded hers to me. It came back unopened, and on the envelope these words: 'I was told to do this if any letters came from you.'

"Then pride came to my aid. I grew rich at once, but I did not care to try and find my false love out; I fled for comfort to change of place and scene, leaving England without even a word of farewell to my best friend. I came back cured; and now, Nell, will you turn away from a man because once in his life he was mad, and mistook mere gilding for fine gold?"

I don't think I said much in reply—indeed, it was not needed. We walked home through the sunshine and the leafy shade, and even the ragged child could not have made me fear the dream-child now.

As we drew near the house we saw Aunt Ida at the window. She waved her hand to us, and I hardly knew whether I was most ready to laugh or cry.

"Roy!" I said; "oh, Roy! how happy she will be when we tell her!"

"Let us go in, and I will just catch her in my arms, and kiss her sweet old face."

But here he stopped short, and looked at me with a dismayed countenance.

"Nell," he said, "where is Pug?"

"Where, indeed?"

Frizzle walked sedately along at our heels, but of Pug there was no sign far or near.

"Nell," said Royal, his eyes full of laughter, "here comes Terence; don't you feel a wild longing for flight? I do."

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